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ABSTRACT

The potential for an increase in the transmission of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) exists because the practice of sexual intercourse among unmarried individuals has increased in all age groups. Nonetheless, an earlier study in 1984 had found that the sexual activity and minimal condom use of college students had not changed significantly since a previous year. This study was conducted to replicate earlier studies and obtain current data for college students in the United States. College students (N=99) responded to a survey which requested each subject to list each partner with whom they had engaged in sexual intercourse, the year of the activity, the number of intercourse experiences, the number of times condoms were used, the number of anal intercourse experiences, and the number of times condoms were used. They were also asked in which year they learned that AIDS was transmitted sexually, and those who indicated that they had engaged in intercourse without a condom were asked why. The results supported research showing that college students' sexual behavior has increased in the last 15 years, and that even though the students are aware of AIDS, over 40% of them still do not use condoms half of the time that they have intercourse. The use of condoms decreased as the number of partners increased. The results of the study indicate that students need to be informed about the risks entailed in trusting partners' statements of prior sexual history. (ABL)

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SEX, AIDS, AND THE USE OF CONDOMS: A SURVEY OF COMPLIANCE IN COLLEGE STUDENTS.*

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With the specter of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), has come the recommendation that condoms be used during any risky sexual activity. Since AIDS is always fatal, the use of protection seems prudent. The choices that are made about contraception can effect not only one's health, but one's life.

Do people know that AIDS is sexually transmitted? Do they use condoms, and, if so, what percentage of the time? If they do not use condoms (and do know that AIDS is sexually transmitted), then what reasons are given for not using condoms? The answers to these questions are important in designing educational programs to limit the spread of AIDS.

The potential for an increase in the transmission of AIDS exists because the practice of sexual intercourse among unmarried individuals has increased in all age groups (Bernard, 1989). Nonetheless, an earlier study in 1984 found that the sexual activity and minimal condom use of college students had not changed significantly since a previous year (Simkins and Eberhage, 1984). However, 1984 was early in the public knowledge about AIDS. Unfortunately, however, a recent survey of male Canadian college students found that only one-quarter of them used condoms whenever they have intercourse (Reuters, 1990).

This study was conducted to replicate earlier studies and obtain current data for college students in the United States.

Method

Subjects: The subjects consisted of a randomly chosen ten percent (N=206; 115 females, 91 males) of the population of a northeastern United States liberal arts undergraduate college.

Questionnaire: A questionnaire sent through campus mail which requested each subject to list each partner with whom they had engaged in sexual intercourse, the year of the activity, the number of intercourse experiences, the number of times condoms were used, the number of anal intercourse experiences, and the number of times condoms were used. They were also asked which year they learned that AIDS was transmitted sexually. Finally, for those who indicated that they had engaged in intercourse without a condom, they were asked why.

Results

Forty-eight percent of the subjects responded to the survey (56% of the females and 38% of the males).

In general, 79% of the students had engaged in sexual intercourse, and 10% in anal intercourse.

Sexual Intercourse -- Of those who had engaged in sexual intercourse, 53% had 1 to 3 partners, 26% had 4 to 6 partners, 14% with 7 to 10 partners, and 8% with more than 10 partners.

Anal Intercourse -- All of the anal intercourse experiences were with people with whom the subject was also having genital intercourse and all of these experiences were heterosexual. Anal sex was reported as an infrequent activity.

Condom Use -- In general, 44% of the subjects used condoms less than 50% of the time they had intercourse. In addition, condoms were used less frequently as the number of partners increased. Ninety percent never used a condom during anal sex.

Knowledge of AIDS -- All of the students reported that they knew that AIDS was sexually transmitted at the time they had intercourse.

Reasons For Not Using Condom -- The most common reasons given for not using a condom were that respondents felt secure about their partners' sexual history, or that they were using some other type of birth control. Less frequently given reasons were that the sexual encounter was not planned or that condoms were unavailable at the time. Some categorized their own behavior as "just stupid" or "irresponsible". Others expressed a "general lack of concern about AIDS" or feelings of "teenage invincibility." The general overall hatred of condoms and the decrease in sensitivity, were also stated.

Conclusions

The present findings support the research that college students' sexual behavior has increased in the last 15 years, and that even though the students are aware of AIDS, over 40% of them still do not use condoms half of the time they have intercourse.

Another finding, that the use of condoms decreases as the number of partners increases, indicates that as the risk of contracting AIDS increases, the students are taking less protection.

The reasons given for not using condoms (perceived knowledge of partner's sexual history, and the use of other methods of contraception) raised serious concerns.

First, it is a risky assumption that one's sexual partner will truthfully divulge prior risky sex behavior - especially in light of research that indicates that a significant number of students admitted that they would be reluctant to inform their present partner of a positive HIV test (Simkins and Eberhage, 1984).

Second, it seems that students feel that condoms are for birth control, rather than for AIDS control. At this time in their lives they seem to be more concerned about birth control than disease control. Since AIDS is always fatal, it seems that students need to be continually reminded that condoms are their best protection against AIDS (except for abstinence. However, abstinence does not appear to be a realistic solution to the problem based on the available evidence of current high sexual activity in college students).

This study indicates that students need to be informed about the risks in trusting partners' statements of prior sexual history. Additionally, although people know that condoms should be used, nonetheless, current programs are not resulting in condom use during risky sexual activities - at least among educated college students. Therefore, it seems important that programs be developed (and evaluated) to increase compliance in using condoms.

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